

The background of the image is a night sky filled with stars. A vibrant green aurora borealis is visible, with its light reflecting off the dark, silhouetted mountain ranges in the foreground. The overall scene is dark and atmospheric, with the green light of the aurora providing a focal point.

THE POWER OF GOD

AUGUST 29, 2021 | MARK 5:1-20

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Last week, we read and reflected together on Jesus' calming of a violent storm at sea, a storm that had his disciples terrified, but that also gave them – and us – a deeper understanding of what following Jesus really means. In the end, I think, we were all agreed that being in the boat with Jesus, regardless of our circumstances, was the better place to be, and that our faith would grow stronger as we travelled onward with him.

Our Scripture reading today tells us what happened the morning after the storm. The boat with Jesus in it has been driven across the sea of Galilee, coming ashore on the other side of the lake. At this point in history, there was a continuous ribbon of settlements and villages encircling the lake. This town seems to be a largely non-Jewish community, suggested by the presence of pigs – not eaten by law-abiding Jews – and by the reference at the end to the Ten Towns, which were Greek and Roman communities scattered across the region. Basically, Jesus and the disciples are not in Kansas anymore; last night's storm has blown them to a very different and culturally-foreign corner of their world.

The disciples are completely invisible during the incident described at the beginning of Mark 5, so we are left to speculate about their activities. We can imagine that after beaching or tying-off their boat, the disciples were occupied in repairing any storm-damage the boat had taken, or might be off looking for supplies or breakfast, before heading home, back across the lake.

Perhaps one or two accompanied Jesus as he disembarked and went for a walk into town, but no mention of this is made. So we must assume that Jesus is alone or nearly so when this man came to him from among the burial caves and tombs. This poor man is in a terrible state, as though all the wrath and destructive power of last night's storm is trapped within him.

Where a modern 21st century eye might see multiple personality disorder or severe mental illness, those who encountered the man and he himself understood his suffering as being possessed by evil spirits; either way – his suffering is severe, and he is alone and no one has been able to help him. The man has been restrained repeatedly by others, but has always escaped; he lives among the dead, screaming and cutting himself on the stones, in spiritual and physical agony, lost to his affliction.

This suffering man saw Jesus at a distance, and ran toward him, screaming the entire way. Unlike so many other people, including the disciples, he knew – or the evil within him knew – exactly who Jesus was: the Son of the Most High God.

And Jesus knew exactly who he was, too, or at least what he needed, because even as the man approached, Jesus was already beginning the process of freeing him.

We can see the awful tension and turmoil within this suffering man, as he flings himself at Jesus' feet while also trying to hold Jesus back, as he switches back and forth between himself, the man, singular, and the mob of evil spirits within him, plural. Jesus and the man encounter one another, and it's not even really a fight; the evil spirits – the great storm of pain and brokenness within this man – they're begging for mercy from the outset, and Jesus is merciful, sending them into a herd of pigs, who'd been rummaging around on a nearby hillside. The pigs rush into the lake and drown, the man is made well, and surely it's all over but the celebrating and the praising God and the marvelling at what Jesus can do.

But no.

In a kind of anti-evangelism moment, the people who'd been watching the pigs ran to town and told everyone what they had seen, and about what Jesus had done. So everyone came to take a look. Between the pigs racing into the lake and the man they'd known as a howling, hurting presence among their tombs now sitting clothed and healthy and quiet, they were not celebrating and praising God; they were not in awe of Jesus. They were afraid. So they asked Jesus to leave.

What do you think? Is that an unexpected response to Jesus' extraordinary miracle?

As much as we might see ourselves reacting very differently to what Jesus did, we can imagine some reasons why the townspeople wanted him to go. They had no greater context for what Jesus did, no history with God, not like the people of Israel, the Jews, Jesus' own disciples, did. But that doesn't come up – no “who are you's?” are directed at Jesus for him to answer. They might well have been unhappy about their pigs being used to wipe out a mob of evil spirits, although if they had said so, I bet Jesus would've turned that

conversation into another one of his teachable moments. Perhaps the townspeople weighed the value of their herd of pigs against the value of the formerly howling, tormented, suffering man, and determined that his restoration to wellness and wholeness was of less value to them than their pigs...Jesus would've likely had something to say about that, too, if that had been the reason.

Or perhaps Jesus was simply too much: too unexpected, too different in his way of accomplishing things, too powerful to feel safe to have around.

This incident with the suffering man, the townspeople, and Jesus is part of a whole sequence of stories in the Gospel of Mark about people encountering Jesus' divine nature and power, and how they respond to him. The first was when Jesus calmed the storm, wowing the disciples and showing himself to have God's own power over creation. And after today's Scripture reading, Jesus and the disciples sailed back across the lake and into an enormous crowd. One of the leaders of the Jewish synagogue, their church, asked him to heal his sick daughter. As Jesus makes his way through the crowd, a woman who had been suffering for twelve years just touches his clothing as he goes by, and power flowed out of Jesus and healed her. And when he reached the little girl whose father had come seeking help, Jesus found her dead and brought her back to life.

These are amazing demonstrations of Jesus' power and the ways that he intends to use that power to reshape our ordinary world into the kingdom of God.

There is nothing terribly alarming about these last two miracles; no pigs, no screaming, tormented men, no storm at sea. Everyone was Jewish, already followers of God. And yet, not everyone accepts what Jesus is doing.

When he returns home to Nazareth and teaches in the synagogue at the end of Mark chapter 5, Jesus is soundly rejected by everyone, by the people who knew him best and who worshipped God, leading Jesus to utter the famous line: "a prophet is not without honour, except in his own hometown."

And in this story, in this Gentile town on the other side of the lake, Jesus had just done something incredibly powerful and life-changing in their midst, and instead of rejoicing in it, all the people rejected Jesus.

I wonder how many times God has done something incredibly powerful and life-changing in our midst and instead of rejoicing in that show of power, we, too, respond with fear or disappointment, and rejection. When we ourselves have encountered Jesus' divine nature and power on our own spiritual journeys, we may have been welcoming of him and full of wonder at what God was doing. We might also feel some resistance, too, if what God seems to be wanting of us is uncomfortable...if God seems to be demanding more of us than we think he ought to, or asking for some part of our life that we didn't really expect him to want. We might have been confused, disappointed, maybe even ready to send Jesus packing if what God did – or failed to do – didn't line up with our hopes and expectations.

If we are honest with ourselves, we know that there have been times when our prayers went “unanswered” ...or more accurately, the answer was “no,” or some other response from God that wasn't what we thought should happen.

Who God is and what God does or does not do...faithful Christians and people who don't believe alike all struggle with that, with the parts of God beyond our understanding, the unexpected actions, the glimpses of another way of seeing the world and us in it, the sheer, incomprehensible power of God...power that is always deployed for our good...but a good that is not always defined the same way we would define it. We might, too, in a herd of pigs running into the lake kind of moment, find that God is too much for us, that what God does makes too little sense, that the cure for what ailed us is too unpredictable in how it unfolds.

As wild as this story is, as upsetting as we must find the tormented suffering of the man whom Jesus frees, as weird as Jesus sending a whole herd of pigs to their death in the lake definitely is, the most unexpected thing about this story is that the important part wasn't the healing or the pigs, but what happened afterward.

Yes, the man was possessed by evil spirits or profoundly mentally ill, however you prefer to think of it. But that is what the townspeople knew, that is what they were comfortable with; they understood it, even if it was sad and awful. They did not know Jesus or the Good News he was proclaiming. That was not comfortable at all; that was different, that was scary, and that was going to possibly require something new of them. So they asked Jesus to leave. And he went – Jesus won't stay where he isn't wanted.

This story raises a really important and challenging question about how we respond to God's movement and power, about how we welcome the presence of Christ and the real-life application of the Gospel in our world. This is powerful stuff; Jesus did not just feed people and cure them of their ailments, he cast out evil and sin and transformed the damage it did in jaw-dropping ways. And in doing so, Jesus made a bold declaration that proclaiming the Good News of God is not just about trying to be a good person and help people, It is about believing, deep down, that God is more powerful than evil and brokenness and sin and suffering, and that we, as Christians, are called to share this message with others.

Like last Sunday's more familiar image of Jesus calming the storm, we see Jesus again as the calm centre in this terrifying tale of suffering and torment and divine power, exercised without any attempt to sugar-coat that power for us.

But if we step back from the action of this story, we can see how what Jesus does fits into the bigger story of the Bible about restoration and the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is all about restoring things – transforming creation and everything in it until they are good and life-giving again, as God first made them and intends them to be. Part of that restoration is healing of body, mind and spirit, renewing and restoring us to wholeness in Christ. The kingdom of God is also about reversals, elevating the poor, the broken and the suffering, driving out the sin in the world that wounds us and brings us low.

What Jesus has done here is vastly more than exorcise some evil spirits or heal someone. Through Christ's actions, in this moment, the kingdom of God has broken into the world with a power to heal and make whole that is awe-inspiring and vast, and so much more than we can manage on our own. It's a power that doesn't act in the world so much as it is turned loose, a power that is out of our control and re-creating creation according to a vision that is beyond what we can see or even imagine. This is Jesus: God in Christ with a power and a purpose that will take the whole world out of its comfort zone and into the kingdom of God. To be so offended or affronted by Jesus that we might drive him away, that we might impede the kingdom of God making inroads into the world right now, that may be the most frightening possibility of all.

There is another option in this story for how we might respond to the power of Jesus: the man who suffered this torment, the man whom Jesus freed...he wants to get in the boat with Jesus and the disciples!

Jesus instead sends him off to travel among the ten cities of the region, filled with non-Jewish people, and tell them about what happened. But he's the one who experienced the full force of divine power transforming his body and mind, and he wants to stay with Jesus. I think he learned the same lesson that the disciples did, the night before, that we learned, last Sunday: whatever situation we're in, whether it's a storm within us or around us, or a clear day, it's better to be in the boat with Jesus than without him anywhere else. Thanks be to God! Amen.